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COVER STORY

After years of close personal experience with alcohol, inquiring into the origins of addiction and breaking his health on it, Juan Rodriguez limits himself to bouts of reading about it

# The drinking life

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Although I've enjoyed periods of sobriety, I'm entwined in a love-hate relationship with booze, experiencing the happiest of times and the worst.

By 1990, I was living in Berkeley, Calif., where I quickly discovered that drinking was taboo, and bragging about it even worse. Therapy is big in the Bay Area – "problems are meant to be solved" – and so is self help. (In Montreal, it's help yourself to more.)

No longer willing to drag the past through my new environs, I entered an intensive eight-week outpatient rehab program, including four nights of group therapy and three Alcoholics Anonymous meetings per week. I came to know "why" I drank. I became fascinated by my sickness. I took a night course at the University of California on the history of alcohol and drugs in America. I became an "expert," and wanted to share my findings with readers. A San Francisco newspaper-columnist acquaintance advised me against the idea. "It's a very dangerous thing to do," he warned. "It might rebound on you." He told me that he had written a series of pieces on his experience in a 30-day program, but within months he was on a bender again.

Figuring that discretion – or maybe humility – was the better part of valour, I put the idea on the back burner. I did n't touch a drink for nearly three years.

Falling off the wagon, I became obsessed with the origins of alcoholism as a so-called disease. (The disease theory has taken a hit from studies showing a small minority of alcoholics returning to "normal" drinking.) If alcoholism is the one major "disease" that medicine does not treat, how did it get hailed a disease? Is the contentious disease concept a rhetorical device to help the alcoholic or, at worst, a scam to serve the treatment industry? The questions exercised a pull on me as obsessive as, well, the desire to drink.

My search led me to Ron Roizen, a Montreal-born sociologist who had spent 25 years in Berkeley specializing in the history of alcohol and alcoholism in America. It's a field strewn with almost as many promises – cures, discoveries that it's a disease – as corpses. Roizen is a pioneer in the field, and some of his views are unorthodox. (See story at right for more on his conclusions.)

"They're like the kind of fascinating Big Question debates we loved as 12-year-olds, but you can never really get anywhere with them." That's why he studied alcohol's history, which he said "keeps you from endlessly spinning your wheels. History is always subversive. It tells you something more than the idealized myth that serves the present needs of the field.

"Alcoholism's disease status didn't just pop out of a test tube or clinical studies," Roizen told me. "There's no technological fix, there's no Salk vaccine or brain surgery for alcoholism."

> **Heroin addicts ... receive a mostly punitive response while alcoholics are the beneficiaries of treatment. Why?**

The disease concept, he said, was concocted in the 1940s by "public-relations specialists anxious to promote science and improve the social status of the alcoholic," in a tortuous process laced with well-meaning, even heroic, opportunism. Even today, scientific consensus on alcoholism-as-disease remains muddy.

Roizen and I became friends, and E-mailed each other suggestions and arguments about what we each wanted from the essay I had returned to, which was taking on a life of its own. (I titled one missive "Alcoholism Article A Disease?") His need to get his narrative out to the general public was compelling. Reconciling academic writing with simple journalism was proving to be more difficult than I had anticipated; tens of thousands of words passed under the bridge. I was getting pissed off (and occasionally pissed). Roizen wrote: "You want me to be grist for your mill; I want you to be the medium for getting my story out. Well, there's the rub." Of his life's work in a controversial field, he lamented, "I feel like an Egyptian slave in the building the pyramids era. How in hell did I ever let myself get into this position?"

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Dean Martin once said: "I'd hate to be a teetotaler. Imagine getting up in the morning and knowing that's as good as you're going to feel all day."

Jack Kerouac wasn't so flip. In Big Sur, his 1962 memoir about a major-league bender, he illuminated "that feeling when you wake up with the delirium tremens with the fear of eerie death dripping from your ears like those special heavy cobwebs spiders weave in the hot countries, the feeling of being a benthack mudman monster groaning underground in hot steaming mud pulling a long hot burden nowhere, the feeling of standing ankle-deep in hot boiled pork blood, ugh. ... The face of yourself you see in the mirror with its expression of unbearable anguish so hagged and awful with sorrow you can't even cry for a thing so ugly, so lost, no connection with early perfection and therefore nothing to connect with tears or anything ..."

Kerouac died 30 years ago of diseases caused by a lifetime of heavy boozing. He was 47.

There are anywhere from 20 to 30 million alcoholics in North America, compared with 4 to 5 million hard drug abusers. The World Health Organization is among many medical outfits to classify alcoholism as a disease. The label resonates. "After a while you start thinking this must be a terrible weakness. And it's not. It's just a disease," TV producer Linda Ellerbee wrote in her 12-step tell-all.

Ron Roizen claims that the "moral valence" ascribed to alcohol and other drugs determines how society treats abusers. Heroin addicts, who can legitimately claim they're every bit as diseased as alcoholics, receive a mostly punitive response while alcoholics are the beneficiaries of treatment. Why? Moderate drinking is sanctioned, even celebrated, by society, which then feels a moral responsibility to help problem drinkers. Heroin is illegal, taboo.

However, said Roizen, alcohol's "moral valence has been darkening" in recent years. Consumption has declined incrementally since 1980, partly the result of the exercise and diet movements. Also, surveys show that familial complaining about drinking has risen sharply in recent years. A generation ago, the alcoholic was painted as the "victim." Nowadays, the victims are more likely those affected by alcoholics.

"In shifting more of our attention to problems like drunk driving (handwagoned by Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, founded in 1980), spousal abuse involving drinking, and fetal alcohol syndrome, we reproblematize the drinker," Roizen said.

"We're experiencing an erosion in our willingness to extend treatment to the alcoholic. Public-funded treatment is more often ordered by the criminal justice system. The alcoholic is becoming a dubious moral character again. The popularity of such terms as 'substance abuse' and 'chemical dependence' signals this shift, conflating alcoholism with drugs. Much of that enterprise goes by the broad name 'prevention,' a wonderfully neutral-sounding word for efforts to darken alcohol's moral valence."

Alcoholics Anonymous, which has more than 2 million members worldwide (more than half of them in North America), believes alcoholism is beyond the reach of science and advises putting your faith in a higher power. "Willpower" is doomed to failure; it's too much like the intellectual rationalization that got you in trouble in the first place. You're too smart for your own good. Come back down to Earth, like the rest of us mere mortals.

Traversing a painfully difficult field since its founding in 1935, AA remains a remarkably selfless organization that has counted much success. But success rates for staying sober are relative, and they're not encouraging (maybe 30 per cent, tops). In this context, "one day at a time" is no mere slogan. It might be a stick of wood to hang on to in a flood of booze, but it's something.

Most people quit drinking and drugging because their body tells them to, or because their lives – work, relationships, just crossing the street – have been rendered unmanageable. In both cases, most people quit because they've finally had enough. You're sick, and you're very tired. In 12-step parlance, you've "hit bottom."

For me, bottom occurred just after last New Year's, when I was diagnosed with diabetes, chronic pancreatitis, nerve damage and other effects of a lifetime of drinking. I had been walking around with this condition for years, too anesthetized to realize it. Taking a drink now would be like playing Russian roulette. In this respect, I'm lucky: I don't have to make the choice to abstain or not. Whether or not alcoholism is a disease has faded to black.

> **'Alcoholics are becoming dubious moral characters again. Terms like 'substance abuse' and 'chemical dependence' signal this shift."**

A part of me still loves the barfly life, the seemingly uninhibited behaviour, the inspirations and "insights" and misadventures, of being under the influence. I like the people conjuring up at a bar. I still love telling my war stories, no matter how pathetic they are. They're like a comic's routine: I know I tell them right, and you'll have 'em rolling in the aisles.

Life is pretty simple for me these days. Writing is more enjoyable (no hangovers, no anxiety attacks). My routine – eating properly, pacing myself – is strict. Spontaneity is a misnomer. I tell myself I like it that way.

So I curl up with the longest book by the hard-boiled Raymond Chandler, author of The Big Sleep and Farewell, My Lovely. I'm partial to such titles. Chandler was an alcoholic. In 1941, he got stuck on the ending of The Blue Dahlia, starring Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake. He told Paramount that the only way he could finish the script was to drink his way through it. He demanded two Cadillac limos on call 24 hours a day to fetch the doctor (for twice-daily glucose injections), take pages to and from the studio, and for emergencies. Chandler drank round the clock, punctuated by naps. He finished the script.

His book I'm reading is about an alcoholic pothoiler novelist with Hemingway delusions and writer's block. He tells Chandler's alter-ego – cynical private dick Philip Marlowe, who tempers the "mean streets" with a nip or two – "You ought to have more sense than to try to educate a drunk. Drunks don't educate, my friend. They disintegrate. And part of the process is a lot of fun. ... And part of it is damned awful."

The book's title is The Long Goodbye.

ALLEN McINNIS, GAZETTE

"A part of me still loves the barfly life," says writer Juan Rodriguez, shown in 1997 with bartender Elizabeth Sharp at Ziggy's Pub.

# On alcoholism as disease

## PR campaign pushed the concept: sociologist

How did alcoholism first become considered a disease? Sociologist Ron Roizen spent more than 25 years in Berkley Calif., studying the issue, writing numerous academic papers and refereeing others for the Journal of Studies on Alcohol and the American Journal of Public Health.

The following is a brief synthesis of the unconventional but copiously researched views of Roizen, who was born in Montreal. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are Roizen's words.

With the repeal of Prohibition in the U.S. in 1933, after 14 years of battle between "dries" and "wets," people didn't want to hear about alcohol any more. "It was like talking about Vietnam in the '70s." Still, public policy had to be formulated regarding terms of sale of alcohol and how alcohol was officially defined in public schools.

"It was a tough issue. Thoughtful citizens feared raising a new generation on the parchment-dry lessons temperance advocates had previously installed. Remember, this was the era where Nick and Nora Charles were flouncing around in The Thin Man movies solving crimes with martini pitchers in their hands."

Commissions sprang up to address the dilemma. In Virginia, a report by two esteemed physiology professors, who said moderate drinking wasn't all that bad, raised such a furor that legislators voted to burn the report in the State Capitol's furnaces before most of them had read it. "In an era when Nazis were burning books, the event offered a stark symbol of pervasive cultural conflict over alcohol in the U.S."

### DISTILLERS' MONEY

The issue eventually became the province of mainstream science, eager to weigh in because its ivory-tower public image had been badly tarnished by the Depression, which many blamed on science's labour-saving technological innovations. Funding for scientific studies was negligible – except from the distillers, who believed that whatever disinterested science came up with would be better than traditional temperance-based findings.

However, the scientists feared the potential conflicts of interest that support by the booze industry could entrain. Thus, studies of alcohol per se (its effects on health, crime, poverty, insanity, traffic accidents, etc.) were dropped in favour of research on alcoholism, in an effort to detect whether it is diagnosable or curable. "This approach was little more than an end-run around the pressing need for the distillers' money."

When that funding turned out to be less generous than expected, Dwight Anderson – PR director of the Medical Society of New York State and a recovering alcoholic – proposed in 1942 that alcoholism's disease character was the image science needed to sell its new mindset, thereby it was hoped, galvanizing public opinion in order to secure enduring sources of financial support for the research.

"Disease-alcoholism just dripped with scientific credibility even though it hadn't really been 'discovered' yet," but a turning point came in 1944, when E.M. Jellinek of the Yale Centre of Alcohol Studies – considered the scientific "father" of the modern American study of alcoholism – joined forces with public-relations consultant Marty Mann, described as the first woman to gain sobriety through Alcoholics Anonymous. (AA had been founded in 1935 in New York City.) Mann's PR campaign revolved around four points – that alcoholism is an illness, that it can be treated, that the alcoholic deserves treatment and that alcoholism is a public-health problem – all borrowed directly from Anderson's 1942 plan aimed at the general public to promote a new scientific approach.

### RESCUED FROM STIGMA

"But Mann added a crucial new spin. In her hands, the involuntary, disease-driven character of alcoholism became a way of offering alcoholics a kind of symbolic rescue from alcoholism's social stigma. Mann, in her own words, wanted 'to make the alcoholic respectable.'"

By defining the alcoholic as the victim of society's ignorance, she finessed a lack of knowledge of the root causes of the disease process of alcoholism.

"Mann occupied a crucial mediating place between AA and science. To demonstrate that alcoholism was treatable, she could refer to the therapeutic success of AA, even if its approach was spiritual rather than medical. On the other hand, she could invoke the dignifying gloss of 'Yale science, even though the science with respect to alcohol was still pretty empty. The scientists needed something to demonstrate that something could be done, and they didn't have anything. The confluence between AA and science is terribly important, because they created something new and powerful."

### 'A LOT MORE WAG'

Scientists can't sell themselves on their own. Organized groups of citizens affected by diseases – cancer, tuberculosis, Alzheimer's, attention-deficit disorder, AIDS – are needed to advocate research on each disease. "Some scientists didn't think AA was going to last that long, that its religious sensibility wouldn't survive the sweeping secular approach of science.

"Ironically, Mann's message struck a resonant chord in American society. Her organization (AA) acquired a free-standing, enduring status of its own. The advertising tail of the modern alcoholism-movement dog gets a lot more wag, and eventually the tail wags the dog.

"The disease concept has this marvelous double meaning. On the one hand, it seems to be an assertion about our knowledge of alcoholism, giving us something firm to grasp and use in addressing alcoholics. On the other hand, it seems a mere placeholder for knowledge about alcoholism, a kind of tacit promise scientists made to themselves to fill in real knowledge as soon as it became available."

*–Juan Rodriguez*

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